

Politically incorrect participatory media: racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis

Article (Accepted Version)

Topinka, Robert J (2018) Politically incorrect participatory media: racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis. *New Media & Society*, 20 (5). pp. 2050-2069. ISSN 1461-4448

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/69422/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Politically incorrect participatory media: Racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis

Abstract

This article examines how racism and nationalism flourish in participatory media spaces by analyzing user comments and images posted on the reddit community r/ImGoingToHellForThis in the week following widespread news coverage of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy whose dead body was photographed on a beach in Turkey. The community is dominated by racist nationalist discourse that combines textual commentary with photographs and other visual media that have been remediated into offensive visual jokes, which “cloak” the racism. Through an in-depth study of user-submitted comments and visual jokes, this article argues that the “cloaks” that obscure online racism can be at once highly obvious and highly effective. Rather than unmasking obscured racist online ideologies, scholars must also examine how racism flourishes while hiding in plain sight by tracing how racist discourses assemble in participatory media communities.

Keywords

Discourse, free speech, humor, multimodality, nationalism, participatory media, political correctness, race, refugees, visual media

Although the utopian proclamations of the 1990s have long faded from fashion, scholars continue to find the potential for new forms of democratization and empowerment online, particularly on social media spaces that promote participatory media practices. However, participatory media are often breeding grounds for nefarious politics, including the virulent misogyny associated with #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2014, 2015a). Participatory media can also foster outrage, anger, and incivility in newspaper comment sections, YouTube videos, and partisan Facebook pages (Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Carpentier, 2014; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011; Wright and Street, 2007). Online racism is particularly powerful, but it can also be difficult to study. Multicultural rhetoric can be leveraged to promote White supremacist ends (Daniels, 2013), and epistemological challenges are presented by “cloaked websites” or websites that appear to be objective sources of information but use “difficult-to-detect authorship and hidden agendas intended to accomplish political goals, including white supremacy” (Daniels, 2009: 660).

Although there has been research into openly racist websites (Billig, 2001), racism in online news sources (Melican and Dixon, 2008; Topinka, 2016), racist email “forwards” (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2015), and racism plaguing participatory media spaces (Hughey and Daniels, 2013; Love and Hughey, 2015; Malmqvist, 2015) and “trolling” spaces such as 4chan (Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015), the role of race and racism in participatory media nevertheless remains relatively understudied.

In this article, I examine how racism and nationalism flourish in participatory media spaces by analyzing user comments and images posted on `r/ImGoingToHellForThis` in the week following widespread news coverage of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy whose dead body was photographed as it was recovered on a beach in Turkey during the 2015 refugee crisis. `r/ImGoingToHellForThis` is a subreddit, or a community of interest, on the social news and message board site reddit. `r/ImGoingToHellForThis` describes itself as a space for tasteless “‘politically incorrect’ dark, offensive & twisted humor.” Although the photograph of Alan Kurdi generated widespread public support for refugees, on `r/ImGoingToHellForThis`, the photograph—and visual images repurposing the photograph—occasioned discourse composed of macabre humor and racist and nationalist statements. As I will show in what follows, the subreddit’s stated purpose to mock political correctness cloaks a form of racist nationalist discourse spurred on by photographs and other visual media that have been remediated into purposefully offensive visual jokes.

I argue, then, that this subreddit presents a different version of a “cloaked” website, one in which the obviousness of the cloak does not staunch the proliferation of racism and nationalism. This study thus expands on the epistemological challenges Daniels (2009) identifies in “cloaked” websites. When cloaks are obvious yet effective, identifying the cloak and unmasking the ideologies it purportedly obscures are not enough. Instead, scholars must trace the warp and woof of the threads in order to understand how they stitch together into functional cloak. This approach follows Latour’s (2004) call to replace a focus on debunking false ideologies with a focus on tracing how things assemble in a gathering (Latour, 2005). I pursue this method here by tracing the subreddit’s users’ visual and textual responses to the widely circulated photograph of Alan Kurdi.

`r/ImGoingToHellForThis` users target the perceived force of political correctness by repurposing and remixing traditional media images in ways that violate the terms of political correctness. This study examines how these visual images make prolific use of remediation, or the repurposing and refashioning of media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Manovich, 2001) and bricolage, or creating objects with ready-to-hand materials and reusable artifacts (Hartley, 2011: 33). These are key tools of “remix culture” (Lessig,

2008) and the “digital citizen” (Wells, 2015) that challenge the “top-down tyranny of the media” (Gross, 2009: 67) and promote cosmopolitan citizenship, postnationalism, and resistance (Deuze, 2006). As r/ImGoingToHellForThis demonstrates, these tools can promote resistance in the shape of racism and resurgent nationalism through the cloak of anti-politically correct humor.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates that visual discourse both generates and responds to textual discourse in participatory media spaces, where remediated visual images and memes become self-generating discursive tools. The link between these tools and racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis demonstrates that these tools can be articulated to a variety of political and ideological agendas and that they can function to cloak those agendas. This study thus demonstrates that studying participatory media requires not only theorizing its structures and grammars but also examining the circulation and active remediation of image and text as they shape and respond to key discursive moments. Therefore, I focus on the remediation of the photograph of Alan Kurdi and the discourse it generated over the course of 1 week on a subreddit with more than 500,000 subscribers by coding 216 posts and 1424 comments. This coding revealed that anti-politically correct visual humor operates as a cloak concealing racist nationalism on r/ImGoingToHellForThis. Cloaks conceal, but they are themselves highly visible. Building on Daniels’ (2009) research into websites that discretely cloak their true purpose, I suggest that the existence of cloaks is often quite obvious, but that the contours of the practices they conceal—and the political agendas into which those practices consolidate—require analytical attention.

In what follows, I describe the structure, functioning, and public reach of reddit, focusing on the culture of r/ImGoingToHellForThis. I then describe the circulation of the photograph of Alan Kurdi and the methodology for my study. After demonstrating how the content of user posts supports racist nationalism, I then examine how the posts mocking Alan Kurdi’s death provide a release that sustains racist nationalism precisely by using the techniques and practices of participatory media such as remediation and remixing—techniques typically associated with democratic politics. I conclude by suggesting that the racism of r/ImGoingToHellForThis sutures racism to nationalism by applying liberal notions of freedom of speech to an illiberal agenda. Identifying the discourses smuggled under such cloaks requires attending to the circulation of racist and nationalist ideas communicated through visual remediation and textual discourse.

Reddit and racism: context and controversy

Reddit is a social news, information, entertainment, and message board site. All posts are user-submitted and consist of a title that forms a hyperlink that either directs to a text post (or “self” post) within reddit or to an external link. Each post contains its own comments section. Users can influence where posts and comments appear on a given page by upvoting or downvoting posts and comments. Posts can be about anything—from world news to cat pictures to paintings of imaginary cities—and users can easily create their own communities of interest, or subreddits, which are referred to as r/worldnews, r/catpictures, r/imaginarycityscapes, and so on. The only barrier to creating a subreddit is a reddit account, and obtaining an account is a simple process, requiring only a unique username and a password—email verification is optional but not required. Subreddit creators set the parameters defining the focus of the community of interest, and subreddit creators automatically become moderators, which means they can enforce the subreddit’s parameters or rules by deleting offending posts and banning offending users. Moderators can also add other moderators. Reddit users, then, can create and moderate subreddits, submit links or text posts, upvote or downvote posts from other users, comment on existing posts, reply to existing comments, and send personal messages to other users. Upvotes redound to the users who submit posts in the form of karma, a form of social capital on reddit. By default, all subreddits order posts by how “hot” they are, an algorithmically determined ranking based on how recently a post was submitted, the difference between upvotes and downvotes, and how quickly the post attracted attention, with the first 10 votes being weighted the same as the next 100 (Salihefendic, 2015). This open, user-generated structure has been widely successful: Reddit had 222,549,237 unique visitors between 15 April and 15 May 2016, and it is the 28th most popular site in the world and 9th most popular in the United States (Alexa, 2016), where 6% of adult Internet users are also reddit users (Duggan and Smith, 2013).

Although its recent growth has been prodigious, reddit has also made headlines for its role in #GamerGate and the iCloud hacking that precipitated the leak of nude celebrity photographs, which were collected and shared on the subreddit r/thefappening. Despite the generally hands-off approach of reddit moderators, this subreddit was eventually banned, along with a number of other subreddits devoted to explicit material. Other banned subreddits include r/jailbait, which featured photographs of nearly underage and in some cases underage girls; r/creepshots, composed of photographs taken of women and girls without their knowledge; r/beatingswomen, which featured graphic images of violence against women; r/fatpeoplehate, which focused on harassing overweight people;

and r/niggers, which promoted anti-Black racism. It is worth emphasizing again that any user can create a subreddit on any topic, which means that although some subreddits are dominated by, for example, misogyny, there are also subreddits focused on women's perspectives, such as r/twoxchromosomes, and subreddits that offer support networks, such as r/tryingforababy. Indeed, reddit is a complex culture full of diverse content ranging from the nerdy to the intellectually stimulating to the silly to the misogynistic, racist, and ableist (Massanari, 2015b). The subreddits focused on the harassment and assault of women and girls have attracted the most media and scholarly attention (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2014; Massanari, 2015a). More work is required in this area, where coordinated campaigns claiming to be fighting for free speech and combatting censorship continue to target women on subreddits like r/KotakuInAction (2016), which bills itself as "the main hub for *GamerGate* discussion on Reddit." However, there has been less study of the ways in which redditors use freedom of speech and humor to cloak racist and nationalist ideologies and agendas. Studying r/ImGoingToHellForThis provides unique insight into the ways in which humor functions as a guise for a network of racist sentiment.

r/ImGoingToHellForThis is not a minor community of interest. The subreddit is the 77th most popular of the more than 300,000 existing subreddits (Reddit, 2015). As of 9 September 2015, the subreddit had 516,036 subscribers (Reddit, 2015). When users with reddit accounts navigate to reddit.com while logged in, they see a personalized "front page" of reddit containing "hot" content from all the subreddits to which they are subscribed, which means that 516,036 redditors see r/ImGoingToHellForThis content on their version of the reddit front page. These 516,036 users can also drive content to the top of r/all, further increasing the subreddit's exposure.

r/ImGoingToHellForThis is a carnivalesque space. On the subreddit's sidebar, the moderators instruct users "to be as crude as you like," reminding them there "is no line to cross here." This statement is revealing of the users' conception of freedom of speech, which involves an absolute right to expression that can and should be exercised by transgressing social mores. The subreddit includes frequent references to "Social Justice Warriors" who are supposedly humorless, hectoring, and censorious defenders of political correctness, which is understood as an interlocking set of codes that limit speech and rational debate to protect the feelings of the moralizers and self-proclaimed victims. Anti-political correctness is, therefore, not always the same thing as racism; for users of the subreddit, political correctness includes discourse about feminism, obesity, disability, religion, pedophilia, death, illness, and the victims of terrorism, war, and other catastrophic events. One running joke is to link to images of pigs,

other animals, and obese women and label them “feminists.” Users also frequently make visual puns on the word “down” in “down’s syndrome” by, for example, Photoshopping the face of someone with down’s syndrome onto a bottle of Downy brand fabric softener. Crucial to the site are memes, which Limor Shifman defines as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users” (Shifman, 2013: 367), often introducing a playful, ironic, and humorous element (Shifman, 2014). On the subreddit, this humor manifests in ironic reversals, as when users mock hallowed events such as 9/11 by Photoshopping photographs of the Twin Towers to include Hulk Hogan attacking them.

Racism is a significant feature of the site. The subreddit’s “Recommended Viewing” section indicates the political sensibilities of the moderators. The list includes [r/ImAWhinyLiberalBitch](#); [r/TumblrInAction](#), a site dedicated to mocking Social Justice Warriors on Tumblr; and [r/AdviceHell](#), a subreddit of image macros that describes itself as “like [r/AdviceAnimals](#), except with more people saying Nigger.” [r/AdviceAnimals](#) itself has been rumored to be a hotbed of Stormfront recruiting. The [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) moderators Spatchcock and I_SHIT_A_BRICK also moderate [r/AdviceHell](#), demonstrating that transgressive racism combined with a dislike for liberals, Social Justice Warriors, and political correctness is thoroughly imbricated in the subreddit.

Of course, from the perspective of the subreddit’s users, critiquing the content misses the point entirely, since the subreddit’s users are offensive on purpose. Indeed, the discourse of the subreddit shares much in common with trolling, which also pushes the boundaries of free speech, at times to critique injustice or to deflate moralizing discourses, but always to offend and provoke (Phillips, 2015). [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) is different from trolling in that it is a space to celebrate the fact that one is “going to hell,” to transgress among transgressors rather than to locate targets to provoke and offend.

This transgressive humor becomes a cloak disguising a network of racist sentiment. The various public guises of racism have been a central preoccupation of critical race theory. Contemporary racism frequently summons race without naming it, disguising racist meanings with polysemous racial codings (Weaver, 2011). “Cultural” or “differentialist racism” (Balibar, 1991) substitutes a focus on biological difference with an emphasis on cultural difference. This form of racism surfaces most frequently in immigration debates, wherein “immigration acts as a substitute for the notion of race” (Balibar, 1991: 20). Another public guise is “colorblind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), in which racist ideas are communicated in code, as when White teens reject MySpace for being “too

ghetto” (boyd, 2011). As I will demonstrate in what follows, r/ImGoingToHellForThis at once draws on these disguising techniques and utterly jettisons them. The disguise or “cloak” the subreddit relies on is the claim to mock political correctness in the name of freedom of speech. The racism is obvious, but it comes cloaked in humor. Operating under the cover of this cloak, the subreddit’s discourse is blatantly and virulently racist and nationalist. In order to explore the confluence of humor, racism, and nationalism, I turn now to the photograph that generated the discourse under study.

The photograph of the Syrian boy

In 2015, widespread media attention was focused on the escalating crisis as increasing numbers of migrants fled such conflicts as the Syrian Civil War, making treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean and seeking refuge in the European Union, where member states often struggled or refused to accept them. On Wednesday, 2 September 2015, the reporter Nilufer Demir photographed the body of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy whose dead body had been washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. This photograph quickly became a focal point of media coverage of the crisis. After it was released by a Turkish news agency, the photograph went viral almost immediately. The Twitter hashtag #kiyiyavaruninsanlik, which means “humanity washed ashore” in Turkish, was used more than 200,000 times between 2 September and 3 September, and the tag “A Syrian Child Drowns” was used more than 300,000 times in Arabic on Twitter (BBC, 2015a). On 3 September, the photograph was on the cover of *El País*, *Truon*, *The Guardian*, *La Stampa*, *De Morgen*, and *The Times*. A petition on the UK parliament website to “Accept more asylum seekers and increase support for refugee migrants in the UK” gained 150,000 signatures on 3 September (BBC, 2015a), and one UK poll showed that 44% of people who had seen the photograph of Alan Kurdi agreed that the United Kingdom should allow more refugees compared to 24% among those who had not seen the photograph (BBC, 2015b). Although it is of course difficult to know from this poll whether the photograph in fact swayed UK public opinion or simply galvanized those members of the public who already supported accepting more refugees, it is quite clear that the photograph dominated social media and mainstream news coverage in the days following its publication.

Methodology

As posts remediating the photograph of Alan Kurdi into a visual joke begin dominating the subreddit, I began to follow the posts and comments closely, noting key themes in posts and comments submitted to the

subreddit. In order to analyze the images and text more systematically, I conducted a first cycle of initial coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). I coded each of the 216 posts and analyzed the 4521 comments submitted to the subreddit between 2 September 2015, the date of the first post about Alan Kurdi, and 9 September 2015, the day following the last post specifically about Alan Kurdi. During this initial coding, I developed codes that emerged as I analyzed for key themes (Charmaz, 2014). I created a code whenever there were three or more posts on any one theme. I coded the images based on the text users placed on the images or, where there was no text on the image, based on the text in the titles of the post. This allowed me to capture one of the key techniques of remediation on the subreddit, which involved repurposing an image by inserting text that altered the perceived meaning of the image. The codes that emerged were refugees (40 posts), racist (33 posts), disability (33 posts), misogyny (23 posts), pedophilia (12 posts), Nazism (12 posts), terrorism (12 posts), school shootings (9 posts), socioeconomic class (5 posts), abortion (5 posts), religion (4 posts), and Paul Walker (3 posts). The most common posts were about refugees (40 posts), 30 of which featured images of Alan Kurdi. The second most common posts were racist (33 posts). Unlike the “colorblind racism” Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes, these posts were explicit in their racism, for example, by using racial slurs rather than euphemism. The frequency of these codes demonstrates an articulation between nationalism and racism in the content of the subreddit, where humor cloaks expression of enmity toward refugees and non-White races.

In order to explore this articulation more fully, I conducted a second cycle of focused coding in order to produce a more refined categorization of the key themes of the data (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). I focused my second cycle of coding specifically on the combined 1424 comments and 73 posts about refugees and racist posts. I coded each comment as a unit, so if one comment referenced six different racial stereotypes, I counted that as only one instance for the purposes of coding. The dataset was substantial but still small enough that manual coding was still possible. I highlighted comments and posts with colors corresponding to codes and tracked the codes in an Excel spreadsheet. This method allowed me to identify overarching trends while also conducting fine-grained textual analysis of particular comments and posts. During the focused coding, I included additional codes to more fully account for patterns in the data. I created codes for political correctness, racial stereotypes, religious intolerance, nativism, White supremacy, sexual violence, the macabre, disability, misogyny, third-world mockery, slavery, welfare tourism, Holocaust denial, and #BlackLivesMatter. I also addressed thematic overlap among many of the codes by following the discourse of the subreddit’s users to distinguish the codes. If a post demonstrated

intolerance toward religion without making reference to the third world or referred to refugees without relying on racial stereotypes, I coded that post as “religious intolerance” or “refugees” but not “third-world mockery” or “stereotypes.” For example, one post featured an image of the *Straight Outta Compton* film poster with text overlaid reading “By far the worst planet of the apes movie.” I coded this post as “stereotypes.” In the comment section of this post, one user asked whether another user was Black, and a different user commented, “hang him!” I coded this comment under “White supremacy” but not “stereotypes” because it made explicit reference to a White supremacist tactic rather than any particular racist stereotype. I also employed simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2013) when posts and comments were relevant to multiple codes.

Racism, nationalism, and the guise of humor

The subreddit sidebar claims “there is humor to find in just about any subject, no matter how fucked up it is.” The dominance of posts about refugees and about Alan Kurdi between 2 September and 9 September 2015 clearly indicate that the subscribers use humor to respond to the news cycle and to dominant themes of public debate. Theorists of humor argue that humor provides affective release associated with feelings of superiority over others (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2013). Racist humor in particular can legitimate the expression of bigotry (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008; Malmqvist, 2015), venting otherwise socially unacceptable sentiments. Thus, the incongruous juxtapositions that form the grammar of jokes—and that r/ImGoingToHellForThis users deploy visually—can both provide affective release and sustain social relations (Billig, 2005). On r/ImGoingToHellForThis humor, operates both as a release and as a “cloak” that disguises racist and nationalist agendas. The coding results clearly demonstrate that humor cloaks the targeting of specific racial and national groups.

The second cycle of coding revealed that the mutual inflection of anti-refugee and racist sentiment dominated the comments section between 2 September and 9 September 2015. Posts about refugees generated far and away the highest number of comments. There were 1019 comments responding to the 40 posts about refugees, 593 of which responded to posts using the photograph of Alan Kurdi. By comparison, the 33 racist posts generated 405 comments. However, there was a clear relationship between racist posts and posts about refugees. For example, one post (Figure 1) linked to an image of Poseidon overlaid with the text, “If you see this while scrolling through the page you have been visited by the based god Poseidon. African migrants will arrive safely in Europe unless you comment ‘thank you based god Poseidon’ on this picture.” The emphasis

on Africans arriving in Europe indicates a racial and nationalist dimension to the joke, but migrants are still the primary target.

Anti-migrant sentiment mingled with racism on the site. Among the racist posts, the most common code is racial stereotypes (81 iterations). Although contemporary racism often works through coded language (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), the mandate to humorous political incorrectness on r/ImGoingToHellForThis seems to encourage overt use of stereotypes that might otherwise be delivered in coded language. For example, one post links to a screenshot of the “Shower with Your Dad Simulator,” a video game that involves matching the skin tone of a child with that of a showering dad (whileycoyote, 2015). The text of the link reads, “Finally, a game for black people.” The top-rated comment is “If this were a game for black people Lefty [the child with the darkest skin tone] wouldn’t have a match.” The top response to this comment reads, “no, that would just be a game about black people. A game *for* black people is like shooting dice in the alley or dog fight simulator 2015 or something.” Other comments include the following: “We all know black [sic] don’t have dad [sic]” and “Bullshit. The black ones will drown in the shower”—a reference to the stereotype that black people cannot swim. As this brief example shows, r/ImGoingToHellForThis users routinely refer to entrenched racial stereotypes in their comments and posts. The subreddit’s mandate for humor indicates that the discourse, like other memetic cultures, is typically ironic (Shifman, 2014). Like trolls, who excuse blatant racism with claims to be “just trolling” (Milner, 2013; Phillips, 2015), the subreddit’s users would likely claim to be “just going to hell for this”—that is, being offensive on purpose, for the “lulz” (Milner, 2013). However, these statements contribute to a larger environment in which humor cloaks a racist agenda.

After stereotypes, the next most frequent code was White supremacy (23 iterations). This suggests that whether or not users believe the stereotypes they spout, the stereotypes do sustain an actively racist political agenda. For example, one post linked to a photograph of an indoor zoo with the title “Took a picture of my son at the aquarium and noticed the second exhibit in the middle” (DarkKassanova, 2015). In the foreground of the photograph, a young White boy looks at a lemur through a glass wall. There is a viewing area enclosed in glass that rises out of the faux-forest floor inside the exhibit. There are two young Black boys in that glass enclosure—the “second exhibit in the middle.” One user responded by using stereotypes about the supposed

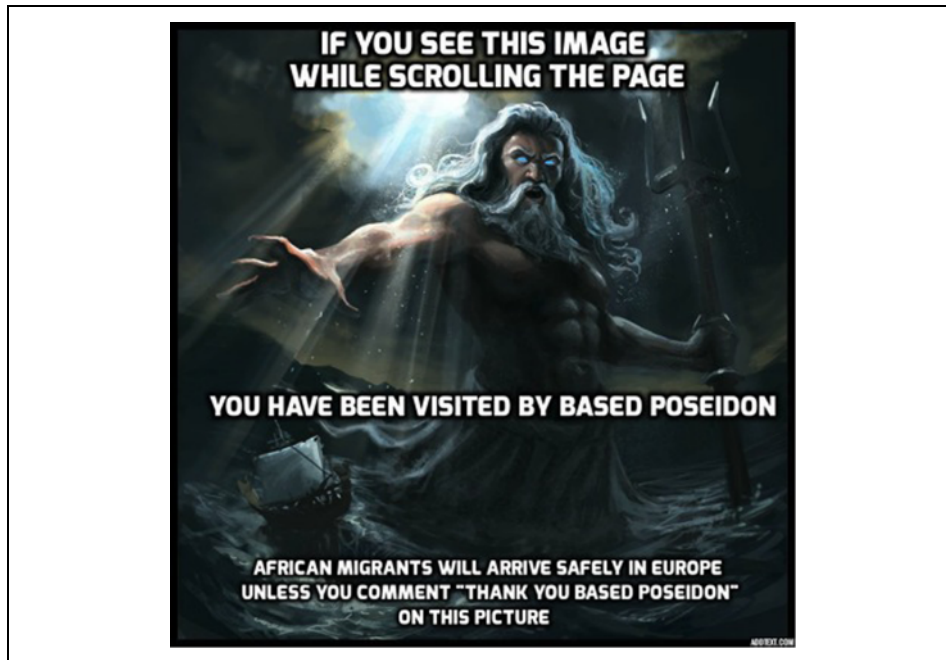


Figure 1. Available at: <http://imgur.com/15IG98k>.

athleticism and uncontrollable libido of Black people in an attempt at humor, writing, “who would pay to watch two basketball Americans wanking at animals in their special aquarium within an aquarium.” Other commenters, though, bypassed stereotypes for blatant White supremacy. Making no attempt at humor, a commenter familiar with the location noted, “That damn viewing area the darkies are in is WAY shorter than it looks.” Another commented, “two types of monkeys.” Yet another commenter posted hyperlink text reading “Nigglets,” which linked to a cartoon image of the “Nigglet,” a character from the “Nigglet and Thugtrio,” a Pokémon parody in which characters carry out attacks such as “shank,” “drive-by,” “bitch slap,” and “shoot” (9gag, n.d.). Unlike trolls, who seek unsuspecting targets, these users celebrate and reinforce one another’s racism, making racist jokes that respond to the original image while also linking that image to racist humor in other participatory media spaces. These White supremacist comments sketch a media ecology in which user commentaries on user-submitted images allow racism to flourish under the guise of humor.

The subreddit’s users routinely linked such racism to nationalism. Another commenter on the “second exhibit” thread wrote, “‘Aquarium’ ... ‘Terrarium’ is much better if you don’t want your homo sapiens negroidis to end up like a Syrian refugee kid.” This comment indicates the complex layering of image and text in participatory media ecologies. This comment

pedantically corrects another user's imprecise diction with text that more accurately describes the original image of the exhibit. Yet this correction smuggles its own racist humor with the pseudoscientific description of the young boys in the image while at the same time citing the widely circulated photograph of Alan Kurdi. Indeed, this comment was posted on 5 September 2015, at the height of media attention to the photograph. The original image thus spurred racist discourse, which in turn responded to other images circulating in the same media ecology. During the week studied here, remediated images of the original photograph of Alan Kurdi were the dominant force on the subreddit. I turn now to examine those images.

Remediation and racist nationalism

The users of *r/ImGoingToHellForThis* use ready-to-hand cultural images and references in a form of bricolage that remediates images in order to puncture political correctness and to promote a racist nationalist agenda. This use of remediation and bricolage dominates the visual posts about Alan Kurdi. One post remediates the "Success Kid" image macro, which is based on a photograph of a smiling toddler standing on a beach—a location particularly well suited to crude jokes about Alan Kurdi (Figure 2). The "Success Kid" image macro follows a strict basic structure: a minor problem written above the success kid's head and a satisfyingly successful result written along the bottom. The *r/ImGoingToHellForThis* poster turned the "Success Kid" image macro into a two-panel comic and changed the original success kid's sleeves from green to red to match Alan Kurdi's t-shirt. The first panel shows the success kid with the caption "Friday," and the second shows Alan Kurdi with the caption "Monday." The title of the post is "Rough weekend." By remediating "Success Kid," this post converts a meme about minor successes into a macabre joke.

Many posts made use of bricolage by piecing together elements of visual culture to create new visual products, for example, by superimposing a photograph of Hulk Hogan doing his trademark leg drop onto Alan Kurdi (Figure 3). This is a remediation of a meme that features Hogan as the unexpected culprit for an accident or disaster. Similarly, several posts inserted a photograph of the wrestler John Cena apparently taunting the boy, remediating another meme in which Cena features as a sudden interrupter of some mundane everyday task (Figure 4). The posts on *r/ImGoingToHellForThis* use bricolage in order to make humorously incongruous juxtapositions. One post uses the "justgirlythings" meme template, popularized by the justgirlythings Tumblr, a single-topic blog featuring images with brief captions about "girly" subjects. A post on *r/ImGoingToHellForThis* remediates this meme into a two-panel comic

with an image of shirtless teenage boy standing in waist-deep water on the top image and the Alan Kurdi photograph on the bottom. The caption reads, “wanting to meet a cute boy at the beach. Justgirlythings” (Figure 5). There are a variety of other posts featuring the photograph, including a wetsuit-clad body-board-holding David Cameron running by Alan Kurdi, the disgraced Subway spokesperson Jared Fogle smiling at the scene, the “Brazzers” pornography label inserted into the photograph, and the photograph converted to gray scale with the words “wasted” emblazoned in red across the front, a reference to the Grand Theft Auto video game series. All of the foregoing examples cite memes or aspects of memes and remix them into macabre forms of visual humor that rely on surprising visual juxtapositions pieced together through bricolage.

This remediation generates and responds to racist nationalist discourse. In the comments on the remediation of the “Success Kid” image (Spewpid, 2015), one user noted that Alan Kurdi’s story was “pretty sad, really.” Another user replied,

Not really. He escaped brutal suffering from his home country and the rest of the world didn’t have to provide free shit for a third of his life because he was wholly unequipped to handle life in the first world. Win-win. Just call me Mr. Silver Lining.



Figure 2. Available at: <http://imgur.com/HuHCIkC>.



Figure 3. Available at: <http://imgur.com/BjtTSvB>.



Figure 4. Available at: <http://imgur.com/3UWguQf>.



Figure 5. Available at: <http://i.imgur.com/bts3rPY.png>.

On one hand, this exchange shows that the racist nationalism on the subreddit was not universal, and perhaps that some users were unaware that the humor cloaked other agendas. On the other hand, it is also an

example of frequent posts mocking members of the so-called third world. Indeed, such posts were the most frequent code on the refugee posts, with 80 iterations. These posts and comments typically refer to the west, the first world, and the third world, or some combination of the three. They tend to suggest that “third-world” lives either cannot handle life in the first world, and so their deaths are unworthy of mourning and perhaps even a benefit. Alternatively, these posts and comments suggest that “third-world” refugees are only migrating to the “first world” to claim benefits. For example, the top-voted response to another image mocking Alan Kurdi (number1kremlin_shill, 2015) was, “THIS is why they shouldn’t have offered Obamacare in Europe.” This polysemic comment claims that Europe offers “Obamacare”—a presumably knowing and, therefore, humorous misattribution—while also implying that refugees are welfare tourists and that, therefore, their lives are less valuable. This combination of claims about the “third world” and welfare tourism demonstrates that the subreddit opens a space for a form of racist nationalism that draws directly from right-wing discourse about economic migrants.

Racist nationalism proliferates on the subreddit. Racist nationalism is an imperfect term because nationalism is not inevitably racist; it can be tool for manifesting belonging in the face of oppression (Skey, 2010) or a banal means for organizing daily life (Billig, 1995). It is also imperfect because r/ImGoingToHellForThis users rarely make explicit claims to any one nation. Instead, they refer to distinctions between the first and third worlds, Africa and Europe, Muslim countries and the West, or countries with poverty and countries with a welfare state, but always in ways that emphasize that third-world lives matter less, that Africans ought to be kept out of Europe, that Muslim culture is incompatible with Western culture, and that migrants are moving for welfare and government benefits.

Therefore, I call this discourse racist nationalism because it reinforces biopolitical distinctions between who can live and who can be left to die, which lives can be supported and which lives cannot, and which lives improve the population and which lives do not (Foucault, 1997). Racism is, therefore, a technology that permits the state to “regulate the distribution of death” (Mbembe, 2003: 17). Racist nationalism of this kind focuses less on biology than on productivity and risk management. What is new about r/ImGoingToHellForThis is that these claims are simultaneously dissimulated and declared openly. The gambit to mock political correctness provides the cloak for a flourishing form of racism linked to a broadly nationalist project that promotes the death and banishment of members of the third world, of Muslim countries, of Africa, and of impoverished nations in order to protect the first world, Europe, and the West. As recent events demonstrate, this sort of racist nationalism has galvanized populist movements in a range of countries, including the United States, the United

Kingdom, Greece, Germany, France, Poland, and Hungary. [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) at once cloaks and blatantly promotes racist nationalism.

The power of images to spur such discourse was clearest in the most upvoted post featuring the photograph of Alan Kurdi, which received 2507 upvotes and 748 downvotes for a joke about “planking” or the “lying down game,” which involves being photographed while lying face down in an incongruous location (European88, 2015). The post was submitted under the neo-Nazi username European88 by a reddit user later revealed to be a young Jewish man living in Florida who also impersonated a White supremacist and a Jihadist and was later arrested for encouraging terrorism (Moyer, 2015; PhysicsIsMyMistress, 2015). European88’s post linked to an image of a fake BuzzFeed article listing “The 60 Best Planks” of 2015 and showed Alan Kurdi as the top-ranked plank (Figure 6). This seemingly simple joke conceals a complex intervention into digital media ecologies. On one level, the target of this joke is BuzzFeed itself, a site that features investigative journalism, entertainment, and “listicles” of the sort this image parodies. BuzzFeed also promotes content based on how frequently readers share content on social media networking sites, which means the site contributes to and draws from other forms of participatory media (Suleiman, 2016). Indeed, the parody featuring Alan Kurdi is actually based on an actual BuzzFeed article entitled the “60 Best Planks,” which begins with this sub-headline from Matt Stopera (2015): “I’ve looked at every submission to the Official Planking Facebook group to bring you this ‘best of’ list.” The [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) post changes nothing about the article except for the photograph featured below the top-rated plank. By placing a serious photograph into a whimsical article, this post targets the listicle format itself.

On another level, though, the post targets the media attention the photograph of Alan Kurdi received. By placing such a powerful photograph in the format of a BuzzFeed listicle, this post suggests that the photograph is no more important than such ephemeral fads as planking. The post at once mocks BuzzFeed and the public reactions of grief and empathy the photograph occasioned. Although scholars of visual culture argue that photographs of death and tragedy can motivate public empathy (Azoulay, 2008; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Zelizer, 2010), the very strength of this form of public reception can also motivate counter-responses. This parodic BuzzFeed post is one such counter-response.

Users responding to the mock BuzzFeed post gleefully participated in this counter-response, demonstrating the affective release humor offers. One commenter received 184 points for the comment, “You know that feeling you get right after you pleasure yourself? That’s how I feel.” Another responded, “Because you pleased yourself to the dead child,

didn't you?" These comments ostentatiously perform anti-political correctness by responding to the photograph with pleasure rather than with the publicly expected grief. One user received 77 points for both mocking this public mourning and for introducing an element of nationalism with the comment, "It's fine, for those who don't already know: The kid is only a refugee." This is an example of the cloaking function of humor on the site. The comment can conceivably be taken in two ways: one is that the commenter hates refugees and thinks their lives are worthless; the other is that the commenter is trying to think of the most politically incorrect possible comment in order to get laughs. However, the cloaking function circumvents the need to make decision. The comment is at once obviously hateful and a joke justifiable as a specific critique of political correctness generally sanctioned by freedom of speech. The cloak is obvious but no less efficacious for its obviousness. Indeed, the subreddit encourages such statements, allowing hate speech to flourish online.

Indeed, the overwhelming response of r/ImGoingToHellForThis to the photograph of Alan Kurdi was to encourage hateful speech devaluing the lives of refugees and other migrants and to promote racist and nationalist sentiments. Users thus not only mocked the photograph—which would certainly be a politically incorrect maneuver—they also used the mockery of the photograph to generate hate about refugees and migrants in general. This is where the cloak's functionality becomes clear. Another commenter received 40 points in the "Best Planking" post comment section for replying to another user asking

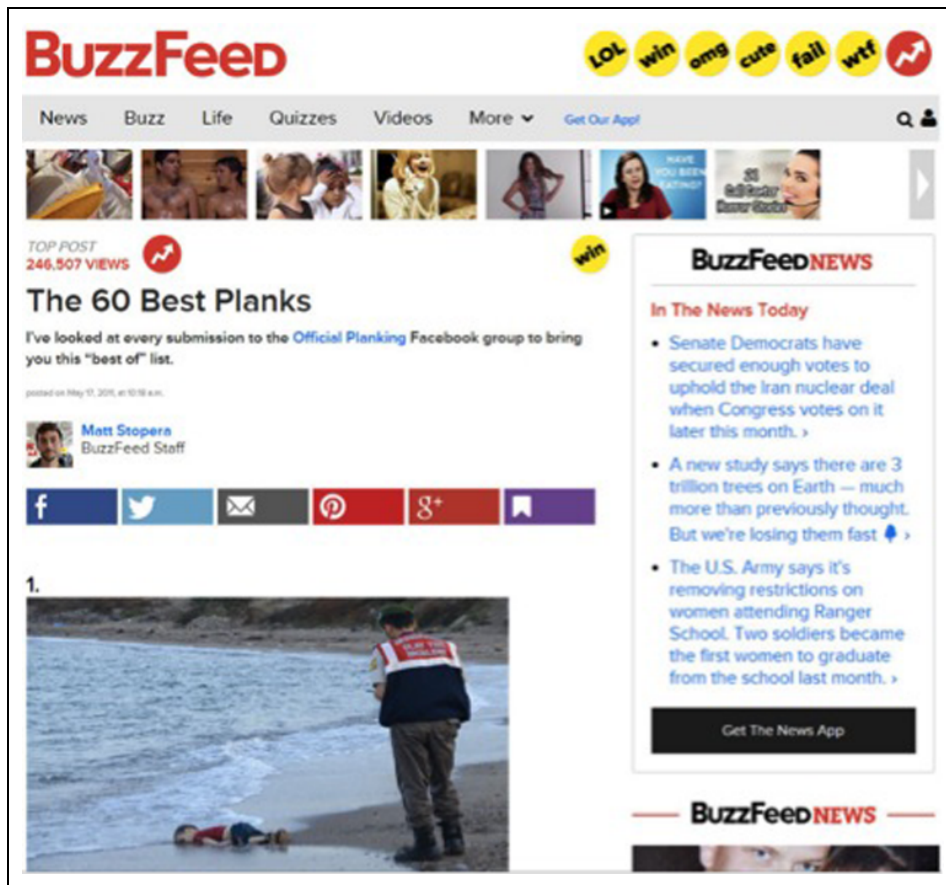


Figure 6. Available at: <http://i.imgur.com/60QQEWG.jpg>.

for context with, “syrian refugee. his father needed implants for his teeth and was heading to sweden for free dental; his sister in canada claims. media keep leaving that out though.” This story circulated on conservative websites such as Breitbart (Delingpole, 2015), and an Australian senator echoed the claims during a debate on a Senate motion on Syrian refugees (Cheer, 2015). Another user pushed back writing, “Bullshit! Here in Sweden, dental is only free for ages 20 and under.” Perhaps, this is an instance of resistance to the racist nationalism on the site, or perhaps the user simply sought to correct misperceptions about the Swedish welfare state. Regardless, this comment earned only 4 points, while the same user who claimed Alan Kurdi’s father only traveled for free dental earned 23 points for replying, “You might wanna look up some of the privileges of coming as a refugee to Sweden.” In the same thread, another user was downvoted to –3 points for commenting, “Refugee from Bumfuck, Syria, attempts to invade the Emirates of Sweden in order to get them free, free teef fixes because they’re brown.” Although

this comment was downvoted, it participates in a larger discussion promoting the general idea that refugees are in fact welfare tourists. The visual joke mocking the serious and somber public response to the photograph of Alan Kurdi by placing it in a “Best Planking” list precipitated this racist and nationalist discourse. This discourse becomes clear only by examining the contours of the participatory media ecology of image and text at particular discursive moments. Not only do images generate and respond to discourse in participatory media spaces, but through remediation and bricolage, they also become malleable and moveable discursive resources in their own right, capable of becoming linked to a range of political projects, including racist nationalism.

Conclusion

This study shows that cloaks covering for racism are often highly visible yet highly effective. This suggests that racism in participatory media spaces requires careful yet critical tracing rather than ideological unmasking. Key discursive moments, such as the counter-response on [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) to the public circulation and reception of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, provide generative contexts in which to trace the memes, references, and visual repertoires that circulate in online participatory discourse ecologies. As a subreddit with 516,036 subscribers, [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) offers a significant context where participatory media practices generating an extraordinary amount of racist nationalism are constantly being remixed and remediated anew. Traditional publishers, such as Condé Nast, which owns reddit, would not sanction publications expressly devoted to politically incorrect statements or rampant racism, even if cloaked in humor. However, user-generated content on participatory media can establish and promote racism and nationalism without requiring the sanction of an established publisher. In such cases, cloaks including humor and visual remediation can provide cover if not sanction for such discourses, frustrating critical unmasking precisely by foregrounding what might typically be repressed but repositioning it as humor. The racist nationalist postings on [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) rely on cloaks in order to capitalize on the power of participatory media to establish horizontal links among users, leveraging the creativity of remix culture to generate a network capable of producing and perpetuating racist nationalism.

Racism not only persists online, it flourishes. Unlike [#GamerGate](#), [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) is not a movement that promotes doxxing, harassment, or direct threats. However, the participants in [#GamerGate](#) and [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#) both link their media practice to liberal conceptions of freedom of speech. On [r/ImGoingToHellForThis](#),

practicing freedom of speech involves purposeful and purportedly humorous transgressions of political correctness. The subreddit reverses the terms of contemporary coded racism, converting subtle codes into blatantly racist statements excused as knowing jokes. The very ostentation on which this humor relies thus functions as a cloak concealing the networks of racist sentiment that the discourse sustains. The subreddit's critique of political correctness at once claims liberal principles and advances the highly illiberal practice of racist nationalism. This is a deep contradiction within the subreddit. Insofar as a critique of political correctness is a major feature of online racism and of right-wing, nativist fascism currently rising in liberal democracies worldwide, it is possible to say that users of r/ImGoingToHellForThis reckon with and reproduce one of the most dominant and destructive political trends of our times. This trend will play out not only in the traditional public sphere but also in the spaces of participatory media, where visual remediation and memetic cultures not only produce ironic discourse but also consolidate a range of political agendas and ideologies. Scholars seeking to study racist and nationalist discourse online must identify how cloaks can be both obvious and effective, focusing on how image and text circulate in participatory media ecologies at key discursive moments.

References

- 9gag (n.d.) Nigglet and Thugtrio. Available at: <https://9gag.com/gag/2607832/nigglet-thugtrio> (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Alexa (2016) How popular is reddit.com? Available at: <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/reddit.com> (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Azoulay A (2008) *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books.
- Balibar E (1991) Is there a “neo-racism”? In: Balibar E and Wallerstein I (eds) *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, pp. 17–28.
- BBC (2015a) Alan Kurdi: has one picture shifted our view of refugees? *BBC News*, 3 September.
- BBC (2015b) Migrant crisis: UK public “split” over taking refugees. *BBC News*, 7: September.
- Ben-David A and Matamoros-Fernández A (2016) Hate speech and covert discrimination on social media: monitoring the Facebook pages of extreme-right political parties in Spain. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 1167–1193.
- Billig M (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. London: SAGE.
- Billig M (2001) Humour and hatred: the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan. *Discourse & Society* 12: 267–289.

- Billig M (2005) *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: SAGE.
- Bolter J and Grusin R (1999) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bonilla-Silva E (2006) *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boxman-Shabtai L and Shifman L (2015) When ethnic humor goes digital. *New Media & Society* 17: 520–539.
- boyd d (2011) White flight in networked publics: how race and class shaped American teen engagement with MySpace and Facebook. In: Nakamura L and Chow-White P (eds) *Race after the Internet*. New York: Routledge, pp. 203–222.
- Carpentier N (2014) “Fuck the clowns from Grease!!” Fantasies of participation and agency in the YouTube comments on the Cypriot problem documentary. *Information, Communication & Society* 17: 1001–1016.
- Charmaz K (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.
- Cheer L (2015) Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi’s brutal claim that drowned Syrian boy wasn’t a “real refugee.” *Daily Mail*, 8 September.
- Chess S and Shaw A (2015) A conspiracy of fishes, or how we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59: 208–220.
- Daniels J (2009) Cloaked websites: propaganda, cyber-racism and epistemology in the digital era. *New Media & Society* 11: 659–683.
- Daniels J (2013) Race and racism in Internet studies: a review and critique. *New Media & Society* 15: 695–719.
- DarkKassanova (2015) Took a picture of my son at the aquarium and noticed the second exhibit in the middle. *Reddit.com/r/imgoingtobellforthis*. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/comments/3jpyr6/took_a_picture_of_my_son_at_the_aquarium_and/ (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Delingpole J (2015) The 5 awkward questions they won’t answer about the drowned boy, Syria, and our “moral duty.” *Breitbart*, 8 September.
- Deuze M (2006) Participation, remediation, bricolage: considering principal components of digital culture. *The Information Society* 22: 63–75.
- Duggan M and Smith A (2013) 6% of online adults are reddit users. *Pew Research Center Report*, 3 July.
- European88 (2015) Best planking of 2015. *Reddit.com/r/imgoingtobellforthis*. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/comments/3jqp8n/best_planking_of_2015/ (accessed 18 May 2016).

- Foucault M (1997) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76* (trans. D Macey). New York: Penguin.
- Gross L (2009) My media studies: cultivation to participation. *Television & New Media* 10: 66–68.
- Hariman R and Lucaites J (2007) *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Visual Culture, and Liberal*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartley J (2011) *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*. 4th ed. London: Routledge.
- Hughey M and Daniels J (2013) Racist comments at online news sites: a methodological dilemma for discourse analysis. *New Media & Society* 35: 332–347.
- Latour B (2004) Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30: 225–248.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lessig L (2008) *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Lockyer S and Pickering M (2008) You must be joking: the sociological critique of humour and comic media. *Sociology Compass* 2(3): 808–820.
- Love A and Hughey M (2015) Out of bounds? Racial discourse on college basketball message boards. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38: 877–893.
- Malmqvist K (2015) Satire, racist humour and the power of (un)laughter: on the restrained nature of Swedish online racist discourse targeting EU-migrants begging for money. *Discourse & Society* 26: 733–753.
- Manovich L (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Massanari A (2014) A feast of jackdaws. *Critical Personas*. Available at: <http://www.newcriticals.com/a-feast-of-jackdaws> (accessed 20 September 2016).
- Massanari A (2015a) #Gamergate and the fappening: how Reddit's algorithm, governance, and culture support toxic technocultures. *New Media & Society* 19: 329–346.
- Massanari A (2015b) *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mbembe A (2003) Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15: 11–40.
- Melican DB and Dixon T (2008) News on the net: credibility, selective exposure, and racial prejudice. *Communication Research* 35: 151–168.
- Milner RM (2013) FCJ-156 hacking the social: Internet memes, identity, antagonism, and the logic of lulz. *The Fibreculture Journal* 22: 62–92.
- Moyer J (2015) Florida man plotted Sept. 11 attack on Kansas City, MO, FBI says. *The Washington Post*, 11 September.
- number1kremlin_shill (2015) I was safe. *Reddit.com/r/imgoingtobellforthis*. Available at:

- https://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/comments/3jpbxd/i_was_safe/ (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Phillips W (2015) *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- PhysicsIsMyMistress (2015) Redditor European88 is arrested by FBI. *Reddit.com/r/subredditdrama*. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/SubredditDrama/comments/3komj2/redditor_european88_is_arrested_by_the_fbi_for/ (accessed 18 May 2016).
- r/KotakuInAction (2016). Available at: reddit.com/r/kotakuinaction (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Reddit (2015) Top subreddits. Available at: <http://redditmetrics.com/top> (accessed 9 September 2015).
- Saldaña J (2013) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.
- Salihefendic A (2015) How Reddit ranking algorithms work. *Medium*. Available at: <https://medium.com/hacking-and-gonzo/how-reddit-ranking-algorithms-work-ef111e33d0d9#.8y34lx723> (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Shifman L (2013) Memes in a digital world: reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 18(3): 362–377.
- Shifman L (2014) *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Skey M (2010) “A sense of where you belong in the world”: national belonging, ontological security and that status of the ethnic majority in England. *Nations and Nationalism* 16: 715–733.
- Sobieraj S and Berry J (2011) From incivility to outrage: political discourse in blogs, talk radio, and cable news. *Political Communication* 28: 19–41.
- Spewpid (2015) Rough weekend ... [NSFL]. *Reddit.com/r/imgoingtohellforthis*. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/comments/3jmslh/rough_weekendnsfl/ (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Stopera M (2015) The 60 best planks. *Buzzfeed*, 17 May.
- Suleiman S (2016) How BuzzFeed is disrupting the media and changing the way we think about content. *Distillery*, 15 January.
- Topinka R (2016) Race, circulation and the city: the case of the Chicago city sticker controversy. *Western Journal of Communication* 80: 163–184.
- Weaver S (2011) Liquid racism and the ambiguity of Ali G. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14: 249–264.
- Wells C (2015) *The Civic Organization and the Digital Citizen: Communication Engagement in a Networked Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- whileycoyote (2015) So where can we download it? *Reddit.com/r/imgoingtohellforthis*. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/ImGoingToHellForThis/comments/3jdadq/so_where_can_we_download_it/ (accessed 18 May 2016).
- Wright S and Street J (2007) Democracy, deliberation and design: the case of online discussion forums. *New Media & Society* 9: 849–848.
- Zelizer B (2010) *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.